

had few roads and there had been civil war in the northern provinces, on and off, for a decade. Rebels in Eritrea and Tigre, the two worst affected areas, had been fighting for self-government. **Rebels and bandits hijacked many of the grain convoys and prevented food and medicines from getting through.**

When the drought in the Sahel broke in 1985, there was a spectacular recovery. The rains were the best in years and, using seed from the United States and elsewhere, there was a bumper harvest. Experts from overseas marvelled at the way in which the land recovered.

But the good times were not to last. Two short years later the rains failed again, and Ethiopia was back in the grip of drought. The rains of 1985 had only provided a breathing space. Once again the television screens were filled with **the hopeless faces of starving children and mothers nursing dying babies.**

With the new drought came a new problem, that of 'donor fatigue'. People in countries around the world who had given so generously over a period of months were no longer so stirred to pity and so it was difficult to raise sufficient aid to keep starvation in check.

Ethiopia continued in a crisis state until 1991. This was an important year because not only did the drought lift, but on 29 May, 30 years of civil war came to an end. The communist dictator Haile Mengistu was overthrown. Massive aid by the United Nations and other relief agencies was still needed to overcome the long-lasting effects of the drought years. This aid, however, could not bring back the lost lives or restore the ruined agriculture of Ethiopia. In 1993 Ethiopia was listed among the 10 most disadvantaged countries in the world by the United Nations.

The basic problem for Ethiopia, and in fact all the Sahel

countries, has not been overcome. As the Sahara desert creeps slowly south along most of its southern border, drought will be an ever-present tragedy in the Sahel.

## The driest continent

Like the people of the Sahel, the people who live in inland Australia are no strangers to drought. In terms of rainfall Australia is the driest continent in the world. Like Africa its large central desert area is surrounded by semi-arid grasslands and savannas (grassland with scattered trees). Hardly a year goes past without some part of Australia being affected by drought. But while crops may be ruined and animals may die, and farmers and their families suffer economic hardship, no human lives are lost.

In 1992 eastern Australia settled into a long, crippling drought. By the summer of 1994 most parts of Queensland and northern New South Wales had been without rain for **almost four years**. Except for a few odd areas where freak storms had brought some relief, all of south-eastern Queensland and northern New South Wales was affected. Many places reported no rain for three years.

On most rural properties, stock was sold off. Prices were poor because everyone wanted to sell and no-one wanted to buy, and farms provided no income for their owners. Farmers were ruined because food had to be bought and interest repayments on loans still had to be paid. **Many tried to keep breeding stock alive by hand feeding** but of course feed from Victoria was expensive. Husband or wife or both were forced to seek work, children could no longer be sent to school in the far-off cities. Business people in local towns were equally hard pressed. Many businesses were forced to close because farmers could not pay their bills.